WASHINGTON POST
28 OCT 1971

Johnson, Lyndon B.
Soc.4.01.2 The Vantage Point
CIA1.01 Helms, Richard
CIA3.03 Czechoslovakia
Org undu
Johnson

LBJ on Middle East: 'I Hope They Fight With Fists'

This is the 12th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THAWING THE COLD WAR"

A favorite argument of those who opposed our involvement in Vietnam was that the war prevented us from reaching any agreements with the Soviets or resolving areas of difference between Washington and Moscow. Many critics claimed that I was so preoccupied with Southeast Asia that I was neglecting Europe and passing up opportunities to ease Cold War tensions with Russia and Eastern Europe. The Soviet propaganda machine fed this notion, both openly and through informal contacts with individuals. The argument was not true, but few people took the trouble to compare the allegation with the facts.

Once basic agreement was reached on a nonproliferation treaty at the end of 1966, I decided to push hard for the logical and necessary next step — a way to slow the race in strategic arms and eventually, I hoped, to end it. I considered this the most critical issue in Soviet-American relations.

We had known for some time that the Soviets were installing an anti-ballistic missile system around Moscow. Pressure rose for us to follow suit to protect our major cities and ICBM emplacements with an ABM system. It was time, if not past time, for mature men to take stock together on how to achieve mutual security without the huge added costs of elaborate protective systems and the expanded offensive systems they would trigger into being. With this in mind, I wrote to Chairman Kosygin on January 21, 1967. I told the Soviet leader:

I have directed Ambassador Thompson as a matter of first priority to discuss with you and the appropriate members of your Government the possibilities of reaching an understanding between us which would curb the strategic arms race. I think you must realize that following the deployment by you of an anti-ballistic missile system I face great pressures from the Members of Congress and from public opinion not only to deploy defensive systems in this country, but also to increase greatly our capabilities to penetrate any defensive systems which you might establish.

If we should feel compelled to make such major increases in our strategic weapons capabilities, I have no doubt that you would in turn feel under compulsion to do likewise. We would thus have incurred on both sides colossal costs without substantially enhancing the security of our own peoples or contributing to the prospects for a stable peace in the world.

Five weeks later, on February 27, 1967, Kosygin replied. He said that he and his colleagues were "prepared to continue the exchange of views on questions relating to strategic rocket-nuclear weapons." He promised that they would send additional thoughts on this matter through Ambassador Thompson. "Nor do we exclude the possibility," Kosygin wrote, "of holding in the future, as you suggest, a special meeting of our appropriate representatives for a more detailed discussion of this entire problem."

In spite of these promising words, the Soviets declined during the next several months to name a time or place for serious talks on curbing the missile race. There was evidence that opinion was then divided in the Soviet government on whether, and how, to proceed with missile talks.

I will always have a warm spot in my heart for Dr. Thomas E. Robinson, the President of Glassboro State College, and for his wife. Few people have the kind of patience and consideration they showed when the "invaders" from Washington descended that evening on their large old stone house called "Hollybush."

We went directly into Dr. Robinson's study, just the two of us and our interpreters. We were to spend most of two working days in that quiet room, discussing the state of the world and its major problems, especially those that concerned us both.

For the most part, Kosygin was reserved but friendly during our long talks. We spoke of our grandchildren and of our hopes that they would grow up in a world of peace. He described his experiences in Leningrad through [illegible] city during World War II. The memory of war's horror was always with the Soviet people, he said, and they wanted nothing but peace.

I picked up his point and reviewed all the steps I had taken as President to lessen Cold War tensions. Now, I said, it was time to take new steps. I told him that I had been waiting for three months for his answer on starting talks on ABMs and ICBMs. As soon as I brought up strategic arms talks, he changed the subject to the Middle East. This became a pattern during both days of our talks. Each time I mentioned missiles, Kosygin talked about Arabs and Israelis.

At only one point in our first session did Kosygin seem close to becoming really heated. He said we had talked about territorial integrity before the Middle East war, but we had ended by protecting aggression. He insisted that Israeli troops go back to the original armistice lines, and that the question of opening the Gulf of Aqaba be referred to the International Court of Justice. Then, he said, and the implication was "only then," could we discuss other problems. At that point, he came close to issuing a threat. Unless we agreed to his formula, he declared, there would be a war — "a very great war." He said the Arabs would fight with arms if they had them and, if not, with bare hands.

"All troops must be withdrawn at once," he said.

If they fight with weapons, I replied, we would know where they got them. Then I leaned forward and said slowly and quietly: "Let us understand one another. I hope there will be no war. If there is a war, I hope it will not be a big war. If they fight, I hope they fight with fists and not with guns." I told him that I hoped both our countries could keep out of any Middle East explosion because "if we do get into it, it will be a most serious matter."

With the Middle East, Vietnam, and other problem areas in mind, I suggested at our second meeting that we consider setting aside one week a year during which U.S. and Soviet leaders could meet and review all the major issues dividing us. Kosygin noted that we now had the "hot line" and could use that whenever necessary, as we had to good effect during the recent Six-Day War. He apologized for having wakened me so early in the morning through the "hot line." But,

(Continued)